

Article published June 27, 2008

Toyota donates \$1M to Smokies: New science education programs funded

By [Matthew Stewart](#)

of The Daily Times Staff

Toyota's \$1 million contribution to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park will enhance and develop a variety of new science education programs and initiatives for students, teachers, families and park visitors.

Toyota's three-year grant, announced Thursday, was made through Friends of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the Park's non-profit fundraising partner. It is part of Toyota's total \$5 million contribution to five national parks.

The grant will help Park officials develop and introduce science education technologies to supplement existing programs and promote science-related careers.

"We're a car company and there is only so much we can do," said Daniel Sieger, Toyota's media relations manager. "What we can do is work with and partner with (the Park) to share beliefs and get them to the next generation."

The company also hopes students will become interested in science and new technologies, he said. "This type of education helps everybody."

The donation is the "most generous package of gifts" in the Friends of Great Smoky Mountain National Park's 15-year history, said Jim Hart, the nonprofit's president. "We're grateful that a great big international company like Toyota is thinking ahead," he said.

Not enough young people are interacting with national parks, said Park Superintendent Dale Ditmanson. "Toyota is very interested in getting young people and families involved in national parks," he said.

The contribution will help Park employees provide youth with new programs in the Junior Ranger program, expand the Parks as Classrooms program and develop new educational programs for the Twin Creeks Science and Education Center.

The grant will also continue summer high school internships and develop new school year opportunities, complete a high school needs assessment to target areas for improvement and conduct a middle school summer camp.

Web-based curricula, an air quality exhibit and a new "Not-So-Junior Ranger" will also be developed with grant funds.

Two free teacher workshops for advanced science teachers are being conducted at the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont through grant money.

The grant will also allow schools such as Gatlinburg's Pi Beta Phi Elementary School to expand their programs to other school systems including Blount County, said Susan Sachs, education coordinator for the Appalachian Highlands Science Learning Center in North Carolina.

The school currently offers three teacher-led Web programs and the ranger-led Parks as Classroom program.

Technology in the form of podcast, earthcaching and distance learning opportunities will also be developed for self-guided tours of the park.

"It all benefits education," said Sachs. "That's why it's a great gift in my mind."